

[Mrs. Alexander Mitchell]

26054 [?] [?] [?] [?]

July 19, 1939

[Mrs. Charles (Mollie

Gibson) LeNoir, ?]

Secretary, Womans Club of

Jacksonville,

861 Riverside-ave.,

Jacksonville, Florida.

Rose Shepherd, Writer.

[VILLA ALEXANDRIA, MRS. [ALEXANDER MITCHELL?],

SOUTH JACKSONVILLE.

Mrs. Charles [LeNoir?], or "Miss Mollie" as she is affectionately known to the [members?] of the [Woman's?] Club of Jacksonville, of which she has been the efficient secretary for seven years, volunteered information on Villa Alexandria. Mrs. Alexander Mitchell, and [incidents?] of South Jacksonville history, and was interviewed as she set at her desk in the business office of the [Woman's?] Club.

Mrs. LeNoir is a small woman of Scotch-English descent, with keen brown eyes, reddish brown hair, and a ruddy complexion. She speaks rapidly, her high pitched voiced having

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a considerable [nasal?] quality, and intersperses her conversation with quick, expressive hand gestures.

"My family came to Jacksonville from Flint, Michigan, in 1879, when I was a very small child," said Mrs. LeNoir.

"my father, William L. Gibson, had been ordered to Florida by his physician, being a victim of consumption, or tuberculosis, as it is now called. The Gibsons were early settlers of Michigan, my father being of the fourth generation of that family in that state.

"When we first came to this section, we boarded with the family of ex-Governor Harrison Reed, living in the old Reed house on Flagler Street in [south?] Jacksonville. The house is still standing in its original location, but was then 2 in the center of a small estate of twelve acres, on which was planted [?] splendid bearing orange grove, and other tropical fruits and shrubs. This was in 1879.

"We were considered Yankees, and were not very popular at that period of Florida's history.

"Harrison Reed was the first Territorial Governor of Florida, also a Yankee, from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, so it was natural that we should seek congenial friends.

"The Reeds had a small son, Harrison Reed, Jr., and he and I being about the same age, were cordial playmates of pre-school age, and had good times romping around the big house and exploring the estate. We were very fond of cats, and I remember at one time we possessed in joint ownership a magnificent colony of sixteen. They were all kinds, mostly scrubs of the common alley variety, but we loved them dearly, dressed them up, put paper boots on them, and fed them until they were as fat as butter.

"It was not long until my father secured a position as bookkeeper with the [Barnett?] Bank. He was the third man employed. The firm consisted of Mr. [?]. B. Barnett, Mr. Sam

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Cooper, and when my father was added, the staff of three carried on the rapidly growing business of the institution. The bank was located in a small building on the same corner where [Furchgett's?] Department Store now stands, southwest corner of Forsyth and Pine (or [Main?] Street, as it is known today). When I look back now. I [?] impossible almost to realize that the Barnett Bank of Jacksonville new employees around three hundred people. It was not a National Bank, but was known then as the Bank of Jacksonville.

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When my father died in 1912, he was assistant cashier of the Barnett Bank.

"We lived with the Reeds for a year or so, then my father purchased an adjoining plot, which also contained an orange grove, built a house, and when the street was cut through past the house in 1886, it was called 'Gibson Street' after my family. The big old red house is still standing.

"Ex* Governor Harrison Reed was a brother of Mrs. Alexander Mitchell, also from Milwaukee. She owned the 'Villa Alexandria' estate on the [St.?]. Johns River, further out on the south side, where the [wisher?] property now is. In passing, she came frequently to visit the Reeds, and [?] got to know her very well.

"Mrs. Mitchell was a tall, well-built woman, and very dignified in her manner and speech. She was middle-aged, as I first remember hers her, [with?] hair quite gray. Her eyes were blue. She was a woman of much culture, a world [traveler?], and quite artistic.

"She took a fancy to me, and as she was along a great deal in her big house, she often took me to Villa Alexandria to stay with her overnight or over the week end.

"The house was a big rambling three story structure, all frame, and not very pretentious from [the?] outside, but the inside was most beautiful. 3 1/2

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"Mrs. Mitchell used to humor me when I would be her guest by giving me my choice of the room I was / to occupy. There was a French room, with dainty blue and gold finished white antique furniture, with heavy brocade draperies, and lots and lots of mirrors - French [beveled?] in gold frames - everything very dainty and 'Frenchy'. This / was my favorite. Then there was the Japanese bedroom, with heavy dark lacquered furniture, with rugs and other furnishings from Japan; and the antique room, furnished in early American. On the other side of the house was a rather large bedroom, all gray and straw color.

"Mrs. Mitchell's own bedroom was very beautiful. It had a big bay window which faced the river. The windows in the room were hung with white silk curtains with over-drapes of heavy blue brocade. On one side of her bed she had a tall screen with three doors that folded. These doors were all full-length heavy mirrors, and the other side was of yellow plush. Three steps led up to her bedroom from the hall, which caused some people to remark - 'The steps led up to her throne.' The woodwork in the room was all decorated with hand-carvings. It was reported she had secured these carvings in France, had them carefully taken down and brought over here and installed in her room. All the little cabinets, the paintings on the walls were French, and there were many round and oval mirrors of French style.

"The dining room was a masterpiece of magnificence. It 4 was quite large. The dining table occupied the center of the room. Which could accommodate seventy-five guests. Cabinets were built in on two sides of the room, with glass doors, and in these were stored her magnificent imported china. In one was a marvelous collection of teapots from all over the world, [patiently?] collected on her many trips abroad. Ordinarily the table was in the middle of the room, but when only a few guests were present, it was shoved up into the expansive bay window looking out upon the St. Johns River. Fine paintings by European masters adorned the walls of this room.

"Mrs. Mitchell's son, John, was married to an actress. The son was rich and spoiled, the actress-wife was high-tempered and [avaricious?], and when they separated, Mrs.

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Mitchell, Sr took the small son, David, when the court proceedings in a divorce suit had awarded to the father. He was then about seven years of age.

"The first time I saw David Mitchell was when his grandmother, Mrs. Alexander Mitchell, brought him back to South Jacksonville early one fall. This was in 1893. He was a small, fair-haired youngster, dressed in a blue [serge?] soldier suit, ornamented with much gold braid.

"I remember he had a couple of ferocious bulldogs, which he trained to catch and kill cats. This, to Harrison Reed and me, was the height of cruelty, and we were not very fond of the 'little heathen'. He used to hire the negroes to bring 5 cats to Villa Alexandria, which he would turn loose and [?] sic those ferocious bulldogs on them. If the dogs caught the cats, they would tear them apart. It was terrible!

"There was no doubt of David's being a legitimate son, as I remember all the talk about the separation and divorce of the father and mother in Milwaukee.

"Davie was the apple of his grandmother's eye, and she lavished everything upon him. He was also very fond of his grandmother and was always loyal to her.

"I remember his courtship with Kittie Parrott, who was Kittie Sutton, whom Mr. Parrott adopted after he married her mother, Mrs. Lillie Sutton. She had vowed she would marry the richest man in Jacksonville, and so she set her 'cap' for David Mitchell. He was a sport, riding wild ponies, drinking, gambling, and idling away his time. But they were married, and I remember when the little boy, Alexander Mitchell, named for his great-grandfather, was born. He was a cute little baby and I have lots of snapshots of him, as my mother used to take care of him a great deal, when Kittie came over to visit in Jacksonville.

"She would come as far as our house, and we would walk down to the river and put out a little white flag, when a rowboat would be sent over to bring the passenger to this side of the river. They were landed at the foot of Newman Street. My father had his own rowboat,

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and made the trip across the river each day, storing the boat at the Florida Yacht Club basis on the river. ([ft?] of Market St.).

“When David Mitchell met with a terrible accident - a bad 6 spill from a fast polo pony, he suffered a concussion of the brain and other injuries, being unconscious for a period of six weeks or so, Kittie Parrott-Mitchell, decided she did not wish to be tied to a broken man, so she talked of divorcing David, who was practically an invalid and not accountable for his speech or actions for [a?] long time. Her father, who was an important official of the Florida East Coast Railroad, was rather stern with her, telling her she had married David for better or for worse, and it was up to her to remember her vows. She refused to live with him, however, and immediately upon the death of her father she instituted proceedings for divorce. In the meantime, she had become involved in a mesalliance with Sam Holmes, a local married man, causing a lot of scandal, and it was reported she lived with him for several years before his wife died and he was able to make her his legal wife. After he died, she married for the third time, now living in West Palm Beach, having attained a [modicum?] of respectability after her wild actions. The son, Alexander Mitchell, is now employed in the bond department of the Barnett National Bank. He was quite small when his father and mother separated, and probably knows very little about the Mitchells. His grandmother, Mrs. Lillie Parrott, was very fond of him, however, and when she died, in her will she left him her beautiful residence on St. Johns Avenue in the fashionable [Avondale?] section. Young Alexander Mitchell was born in 1908.

“The first ferryboat operated on the St. Johns was in 1893 or 1894. It was called the Armington, and I used to come over on it to Jacksonville to attend the Bradford Institute, a private school operated by Mrs. B. Drew Williams, under the auspices of the Episcopal Church.

“The next ferry was called the Mechanic. It belonged to the Flagler System and would [meet?] the trains at the foot of Hogan Street and carry freight and passengers over to the south side station of the Florida East Coast Railway.

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"The bridge was started about that time, and my mother who died in 1914, said she wished she might live to see the bridge completed and the two cities, Jacksonville and South South Jacksonville, joined together.

"During the fire of May 3, 1901. we children were awed by the spectacle from the south side of the river. It must have been either on a Saturday or some holiday, as we were home from school. It started about noon. We had been forbidden to go down through the orange grove which ran to the water's edge. Our place was all fenced in, and there was a gate on the river side, but we never went beyond the gate. The flames kept shooting up and the black smoke rolling in, so we decided to go up to the rook of the house. We mounted the stairs to the attic, and through a window climbed out on the roof, from which we had a magnificent view. I remember the smoke and flame which came from the roof of the Catholic Church after a blazing brand was wafted there by the high wind, and we watched as the church was rapidly consumed.

"Along in the evening the ferry began to bring people over to the south side - their homes and belongings destroyed 8 in the fire, their clothing in shreds and the shoes burned from their feet as they walked through the hot ashes. That night we had nineteen guests.

"The burning brands fell in every direction during the height of the fire - the fire department simply could not keep up with them - and even the next morning buildings were still smoking.

"Father stayed at his post in the Barnett Bank until 3 o'clock on the morning after the fire. The bank did not burn, as the fire lifted and burned the next block. Everything in the other direction, up in the block where the [?] Club now is, was destroyed, also.

"Harrison Reed, or Harry Reed, as we called him, when he finished school, went to work for the Hubbard Hardware Co. Later he was offered a position with the Standard Oil Co., having charge of their warehouse in Jacksonville. That was when we parted company,

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as mother thought a 'warehouseman' was not good enough / for her daughter to keep company with. When the Standard Oil Company became more prosperous and influential, Harrison Reed was promoted, until he finally became the Florida manager. He is retired now, having a beautiful, home in San Jose. He must be a multi-millionaire, as he sold hundreds of acres to the real estate company developing San Jose [Estates?], one of Jacksonville's most beautiful residential suburbs. He has quite a collection of valuable historical relics pertaining to Florida, which he has treasured from his father's time, when he was Territorial Governor.

Getting back to Mrs. Mitchell, she was always a devout Episcopalian, and when South Jacksonville was building up, she 9 conceived the idea of building a chapel on the south side. The spot being selected, she got people interested, and no one was more enthusiastic than my own dear mother. You see, being Yankees, we [made?] few close friends, so mother had little social activity and was glad to give her time to helping Mrs. Mitchell in establishing the little all Saints Chapel, as it was known.

"I remember that my father used to go hunting with Mr. Ed Holmes and through this association they became fast friends. One day Mr. Holes Holmes said: ""Gibson, I am going to have my wife call on Mrs. Gibson, so we can be family friends."" My father was so delighted when he brought this message home, but my mother said - ""No, she'll not call - we are too much Yankee for her"" - and sure enough she didn't.

"If you will come back tomorrow, I will tell you more about the Mitchells and All Saints Church, also the yellow fever epidemic of 1888." Couch Villa Alexandria Mrs. LeNoir [?]

July 21, 1939.

Mrs. Charles O. LeNoir,

Secretary,

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Jacksonville [Womans?]

Club

861 Riverside Ave.

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Rose Shepherd, Writer.

VILLA ALEXANDERIA, MRS. ALEXANDER MITCHELL.

SOUTH JACKSONVILLE. (Additional).

Continuing, Mrs. LeNoir said: "David Mitchell was most loyal at all times to his grandmother. I remember one evening after he and Kittie were married, she had dressed to go out to dinner at on of the Jacksonville hotels. David refused to accompany her. Angered, she ask why. "'I have another engagement,'" he said. "What is more important than accompanying me to this dinner. You know I can't go alone,'" said Kittie. "'I have an engagement with my grandmother.'" "'How long have you had this engagement?'" asked Kittie. "Twenty-two years,'" replied David. "'My grandmother and I had an agreement when she first assumed my care that whenever she needed me I would come, or if she were lonesome and wished me to stay with her, I would spend as long as she liked in companionship - just she and I. This is one of those times she has asked me to stay with her for the evening, and I am bound to go on my honor.'" So Mrs. Kittie had to stay quietly at home by herself.

"During the Spanish-American War, when the troops were encamped in Jacksonville, another grandson— John Mitchell, David's half-brother, son of his father by the second wife - was 2 a Lieutenant in one of the Wisconsin regiments, and Mrs. Mitchell give a

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grand party at Villa Alexandria for the young people of Jacksonville, and I was invited. This John Mitchell seemed to be a very fine young man, serious, and businesslike.

"Mrs. Alexander Mitchell was a life-long [Episcopalian?], and [?] through the efforts of some of the residents of the south side, a chapel was established as an adjunct of St. Johns Church of Jacksonville. My mother was one of the first ones to project this venture; others were Mr. and Mrs. Ed Holmes, Judge Call and his wife, and Mr. and Mrs. DeLacy. Later Mrs. Mitchell became interested and worked heart and soul for the little church, operated first as a Mission - All Saints - and it was hard work for the parishioners to keep Mrs. Mitchell from feeling that she practically owned it, [a?] she gave the organ, the furniture, the vestments, and wanted to do everything that was needed without question and without price.

"The first services were held in [1885?] in the little waiting room at the Ferry station, where passengers changed trains, or went across to Jacksonville from the Florida East Coast Railway coaches. I still have the little Bible that was given me as a souvenir of the first meeting at All Saints.

"Mrs. Mitchell would have the ladies of the Guild meet at her home, and after the / business meeting was over she would entertain them by reading from a diary she had kept of a trip to Egypt and up the Nile. Just a few paragraphs at a time, but the reading was continued until the entire trip from start to finish had been covered.

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"Mr. [Will?] Crawford was the first President of the Florida East Coast. He built a fine home in South Jacksonville, and Mrs. Crawford was as much interested as my mother was in the little Mission of All Saints, and it was those two who started the building. The Florida East Coast gave some money, and the rose memorial window to Mr. Green, an official of the Florida East Coast, was also given by the railroad people.

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"The first rector of all Saints was the Rev. Mr. Weller, from Jacksonville, while it was still a Mission of St. Johns.

"The first regular rector after it attained the status of a church was Rev. Mr. Lee. After he left, we had a splendid little man by the name of Grubb. He was only there for a short time then we had Mr. Brook G. White. Then we had a Mr. Hightower. I had by this time become interested in Christian [Science?], and Mr. Hightower, being strict adherent of the letter of the law, told my mother she should take my science books away. Mother replied that as long as I read the Bible, I could worship as I pleased. As I quit All Saints and started attending the Christian Science Church, in Jacksonville, I did not know much its affairs after that.

"Mrs. Mitchell was very unhappy about David's marriage, and the way it turned out. After there was so much scandal about Kittie's carryingson, the divorce, and all, Mrs. Mitchell withdrew more and more from civic and church affairs, and lived alone in her big mansion. Her friends were very grateful that she died before the vast fortune was dissipated and went into undeserving hands, and those [o?] of schemers and tricksters.

"Mrs. Mitchell is buried in the little old St. Nicholas Cemetery on the south side. Her grave is in / about the center 4 of the large plot in the southeastern section, a high mound, with a flat marble slab on top. I had memorized the inscription composed by David and which he had carved on the slab - something about 'good deeds live afterwards, etc.' - but it escapes me now. However, it is very pretty and very appropriate, describing Mrs. Mitchell's acts and charitable inclinations.

"By the way, she was most helpful in carrying on the work and establishing St. Luke's Hospital in Jacksonville. There was a very elaborate room which she furnished and endowed in St. Luke's, as the "Martha Reed Mitchell Memorial Room." The first sewing I did as a child was some little dollies of linen which I homstitched by hand for this room.

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"As I said before, my first experience at school was with the little children of Mrs. L. Drew Williams' Bradford Institute - a private school under the [?] of St. Johns Episcopal Church. After Mrs. Williams became too feeble to teach, the work was taken over by Miss Alice [rew?]. There were eight girls, among them Kittie Parrot, later Mrs. David Mitchell, and Nellie Stewart, of [?] George Island, later Mrs. Victor Blue.

"When the school dwindled down and was closed, I attended [Duval?] High School, of which Prof. Pasco was principal.

"After I graduated, I went to Cambridge Institute, at Cambridge, Massachusetts. There I saw snow for the first time, and sat up all night watching the feathery flakes fall into drifts and pile up on the pavements to a depth of twelve inches or more.

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"My father, who, as I said had come to Florida for his health in 1879, now became very ill. This was in 1912. I had to return home, and did not get to finish my college course, as father died, and my mother had become so worn out in taking care of him during his long illness that she, too, passed away two years later - in 1914.

One incident I remember at Cambridge was the rise of the famous [?] Negro, Booker T. Washington, who was traveling and lecturing in the [?] states, raising funds for the Tuskegee Institute. A young lady from New Orleans, whose name I have forgotten, and I refused to attend his lectures, and when other girls were discussing him, we would get up and leave the room. They called us the 'two hot-headed little outhorners.'

"After father died, I started the 'Booklovers Library' which was something new at that time in the way of a circulating library. I ran it until the Jacksonville Public Library was opened in its present location in the building which was considered very [?] and up-to-date at that time - 1904; when Miss Elizabeth Long and I who had been working for several months

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getting the books ready and [maps?] mounted to hang, went to work there. I stayed there until 1909. Mr. George B. Utley was the librarian.

"My two brothers, who were born in South Jacksonville, one in 1880 and the other in [?], had started a kodak store, handling pictures, /handling and developing photographic films, gifts, picture frames, etc., in the building at 24 West Forsyth - St., 6 later occupied by [?] Candy Store, and now the home of the Luggage Shop.

"The had built up a fine business, as it was a new line and they had no opposition, but they gave such splendid service they could not help but succeed. Then my oldest brother developed tuberculosis. I took him to the best doctors and finally to a Sanitarium in New York State, where he died. I came back and it was not long before my youngest brother, too, became ill from the dread disease. He seemed stronger, and we sent him to Arizona. The old red house on the south side which had been our childhood home was sold, and all the money was devoted to trying to help him make a recovery. He wrote to be brought back to Jacksonville, as he said Arizona was [?] such a dusty, dry, hot, disagreeable place, and it was so lonesome for him. After he returned, he seemed cheered up and was actually better for a few weeks, then one night as I sat near him he said - 'I am going to die.' In a few hours he had passed away.

"At one time, Dr. Morris, of Jacksonville, said I, too, would develop tuberculosis - it could not be helped - - I had inherited it the same as my two brothers. But, touch wood!" There she smiled, and she touched her desk with her right hand three time - "I took up Christian Science, and I have never had a symptom.

"After my second brother died, I ran the store very successfully for several years, taking out enough money to build the little apartment house at [41?] East [Adams?] - St. I sold the store for a very handsome sum, and went into the Christian 6 Science Reading Room, where I stayed until I was married in 1915.

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"During the World War my husband was [??] [??] in the U.S. Naval Service at Savannah, Georgia. I went up there to be near him, and for two years worked in the auditors office of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad.

"After the war we returned to Jacksonville and I went to work in the general office of the Standard Oil Co., being in Mr. Zacharias' office for ten years.

"In 1932, I came over and had a talk with Mrs. [?] [Cummer?], who was at that time president of the Womans Club of Jacksonville, and applied for the position of secretary. We talked at length. The club membership had gone down, they were deeply in debt, and Mrs. [Cummer?] told me the salary would be small to start with, and I would have to be sort of house-keeper, looking after the physical property of the club, as well as handling the social details, the office work, accounting, and other incidental duties. I told her I was used to hard work, and was willing to undertake it, and here I am.

"This work I enjoy most thoroughly. I am on duty, you might say, twenty-four hours a day, as I have my residence here. This morning I was up at 6:30 and came down and opened up the lower windows - the view from the solarium through the rose beds, the sun rising over the palms - it was inexpressibly beautiful. The work is varied. I enjoy planning the luncheons and banquets we have served several of the latter when there were five hundred present. Of course, during the summer months we do not do much, and I am only on half pay, being on active 7 duty only on Wednesdays and Fridays, which are open days both to club members and the public.

"My husband travels, and I am alone a great deal, but there is never a dull moment.

"We have two colored regular employees, Lizzie and Jasper, who have been with the club so long their duties are automatic, and they are as much as part of the place as the walls and woodwork. When putting on large affairs, we have to have additional maids and waiters, and then, too, during the winter months we have a regular hostess on full time,

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who plans all the meals and does the purchasing of food. In the summer I have to take care of this. [??]

“When I first came with the club in [19?] they had to borrow money to carry on their expenses, and it is gratifying now to know we are rapidly calling our bonds, and that the funds taken in from dues and the different departments are more than sufficient for all expenses and we are rapidly laying up a bonus. The club now has a roster of eight hundred members - and not a dull one in the lot!” she finished enthusiastically.

“Besides belonging to the Womans Club and the Christian Science Church, I also hold membership in local chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Colonial Dames, and the Order of the Eastern Star, America Chapter. So, you see, I am a very busy woman!”